

Climbing Notes 2006

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

North Cascades National Park
Service Complex



Backcountry Permits: Your Blank Spot on the Map

“I am glad that I shall never be young without wild country to be young in. Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?” - Aldo Leopold

Freedom—that glorious feeling on a classic summer day when civilization drops away, when rock under foot and breeze in your face are the only things calling you. The “untrammelled” Wilderness epitomizes freedom, without human restraint. So it is not surprising then, that more than one climber has stood in line for a backcountry permit and wondered: Where is the freedom, the spontaneity? Why, in fact, do you need a permit at all?

In busy areas like Boston Basin or Sulphide, the two most important reasons are:

1. To protect solitude. Another defining characteristic of Wilderness is the freedom to be alone—a most precious commodity in this urban world. Permits limit the number of people you will see camping near you or climbing your same route.
2. To protect and preserve the wilderness. The permit system establishes use limits, and therein lies the single greatest safeguard offered to an area. Protection trumps restoration—which is costly and often fails—every time.

In remote areas like the Pickets or the Chilliwack Range, or on winter climbs, solitude is already high, and impacts are little. Here, permits serve two more important purposes:

3. To provide sound data. Good land management depends on good data. Data helps shape the future of the park via management plans, and it informs every day decisions such as visitor center hours, bathroom maintenance, composting toilet locations, and road access. These decisions affect all climbers. Will you be counted?
4. Education and safety. Permits provide an information-sharing opportunity between climbers and



Climbers on the summit of Magic Mountain

2005 Search and Rescue Incidents

North Cascades National Park personnel responded to nine incidents in 2005. The total unprogrammed emergency cost to the National Park Service was \$14,996.38, of which \$6,208.00 was for helicopter evacuation. While most of these SARs were minor, the July incident was the worst mountaineering accident in park history. This and one other incident are summarized below:

July 10, 2005

Multiple fatality accident, off route, catastrophic anchor failure

Rangers were notified by cell phone call of an accident with fatalities and a seriously-injured survivor below Sharkfin Tower. An immediate helicopter response was not possible due to poor weather and nightfall, so two teams of rangers climbed to the party during the night, reaching the site by sunrise. The head-injured survivor was air-lifted directly to Harborview Medical Center and two uninjured survivors were flown to Marblemount. Three climbers died in this accident and were recovered later the same day.

The investigation found that this party of six climbers was attempting the SE Ridge of Sharkfin Tower. The group missed the standard gully, which they realized after they ascended a different gully farther to the east,

continued on reverse...

rangers. Many climbers already practice Leave No Trace. However, last season alone wilderness rangers dismantled 31 illegal fire rings, cleaned up 63 incidents of toilet paper/feces, and picked up 2,220 pieces of litter. These impacts occur in remote climbing locations, too. So please be patient if you’ve heard it before, and help spread the ethic to all in the climbing community. Lastly, permits provide a starting point for a search in the event of an emergency.

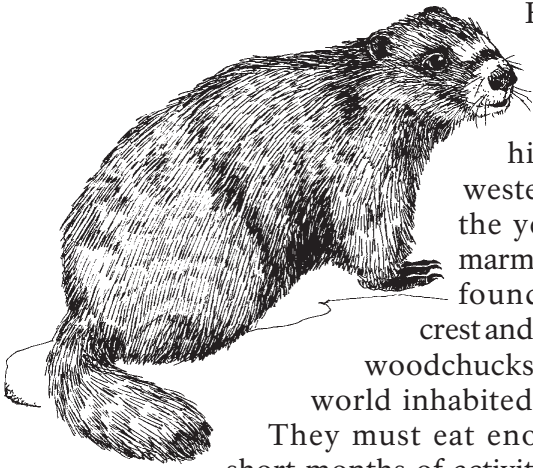
Wilderness areas like the North Cascades are some of the last remaining places where we can climb a summit and still view a primitive landscape, find peace and quiet, and experience a level of physical challenge unavailable elsewhere. These lands are yours to protect. Obtaining a permit is a small imposition but carries important rewards. You may trade off a little freedom, but that blank spot on the map is yours.

Test your internal recognition software. What peaks are pictured on this year’s banner photo (foreground, above)?

Mixup, Triplets, Cascade, start of Johnnaburg, from Sahale Arm.

That Marmot Ate My Bivy Sack — Wild Tales from the Alpine

Whistle pig...snafflehound...marmot...whatever your favorite moniker for these furry rodents, you can't help but notice them when you are in the alpine. You might see them standing at attention at your impending approach, ready to whistle a warning to their colony should you appear threatening, or galumping back to their burrows, or tussling with each other over the steep hillsides. You almost certainly will have smelled them if you have spent a night in lower Boston Basin, and if you are really unfortunate, you might have done battle with one or two of them over your gear.



Hoary marmots (found in the subalpine or higher in the western Cascades; the yellow-bellied marmot is generally found east of the crest and lower) are the woodchucks of the rocky world inhabited by climbers.

They must eat enough in their short months of activity to accumulate fat for a lengthy seven months of hibernation! Marmots mainly enjoy greens, flowers, and seeds, but they will not hesitate to take advantage of people-food. Like many mammals of the Pacific Northwest, marmots of-

ten define "food" by its smell, and especially its salt content. Since our gear is often salty from sweat, it's fair game for marmot food as well.

Marmots are infamous for gnawing on sweaty boots left at the top of the West Ridge couloir on Forbidden. One hiker on Sahale Arm was actually licked on his boot while he was still wearing it, by a fearless marmot who obviously viewed him as a giant, friendly salt lick. And on more than one occasion, expensive bivy bags have been gnawed on by marmots, sometimes looking for food foolishly left "hidden" inside, or just seeking salt. In the most famous of these stories, one climber returned to camp to find his bivy bag was missing entirely. Suspecting marmot-play, he searched the nearby burrows and caught a glimpse of his gear down a marmot hole. This story has a happy ending: He dug his bivy sack out, and found it none too worse for the wear.

So the next time you are in the neighborhood of a marmot colony, remember that they live here year round and have only these five summer months to get ready. Don't let them use your gear or food as part of their hibernation plan. Keep a clean camp to discourage rodents from sniffing you out, and put all smelly, sweaty items in a secure location: in a bear bag, hung off a large rock, or in a hard-sided container with rocks on top. Help keep the wildlife healthy and free, and save the wild tales for the climb.

Reflections on Sharkfin

One rock moved and forever changed the mountain. In the worst climbing accident in North Cascades National Park history, three climbers died on Sharkfin Tower in 2005.

After the accident, many questions arose, creating doubt and fear about how dangerous it is to climb Sharkfin and elsewhere. Could the accident have been prevented? Was it climber error or equipment failure? Is it safe to climb in the basin? Some questions have been answered, some will always remain.

Regardless of these questions and the inherent risks, as climbers we still go to the mountains. We sense our vulnerability as we scramble across loose rock. Fear is a factor we realize must be controlled in order to continue to our summit destination. We seek freedom, catharsis, a release that brings our body and mind into balance in an unbalanced, chaotic world.

Unanswered questions threaten that balance. One rock moved and forever changed the mountain, but then we realize—it is not the mountain that has changed, but we ourselves.



A ranger directs the Airlift NW helicopter to a landing on the Quien Sabe Glacier, Sharkfin SAR

SAR Incidents continued...

and then began climbing back toward the tower. During this traverse one member was hit by rockfall, leaving her mobile but injured, so the group decided to retreat from the climb via the same gully they had just ascended.

At the top of the gully a rappel anchor was constructed around a boulder on a slight down-sloping slab. Two climbers rappelled individually without incident to mid-gully. The catastrophic accident happened as the next two climbers began a rappel with the injured climber attached between them. The sixth climber planned to rappel last and was tied into the anchor. At approximately ten feet into the rappel, the anchor rock either slid or overturned and the four climbers went with it to the bottom of the gully, approximately 300 feet. The two mid-gully climbers were not hit. They downclimbed to assess their partners and go for help.

September 27, 2005

Overdue, unprepared, inadequate gear

Two climbers were reported overdue from Mt. Shuksan's Fisher Chimneys route. Rangers searched via helicopter and found the climbers' camp gear at the base of the chimneys, but a thorough aerial search of the intended route found no sign of the climbers. Upon expanding the search area, the climbers were found walking the Baker Lake Road, on the opposite side of the mountain from their intended trip. A follow-up interview found that while one climber had done an early-season ascent of the route previously, they were not prepared for the significantly different conditions of late September. The leader stated that the ascent was "dangerous and scary" for them, and "over their heads" to descend to their camp, so they followed the moderate Sulphide Glacier down.